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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to determine whether college juniors and seniors view their freshman-writing instruction as beneficial and to assess its impact on the writing they do within their specific disciplines. Although a great deal of theory surrounds the teaching of freshman writing, very little research has been done to assess its effectiveness from the students' point of view once they start writing within their disciplines. The present research, utilizing a survey which was administered to a sample of 297 juniors and seniors at three colleges/universities in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia, primarily address the following questions: (1) How do students assess the value of their freshman-writing instruction?; (2) How does a non-discipline-specific freshman-writing curriculum impact discipline-specific writing challenges?; and (3) Is the writing in a student's chosen discipline more valuable to her than the instruction and practice she found in her freshman-writing program? Results indicate that students' perceptions about the value of freshman writing vary according to their majors. Findings suggest that students in the humanities and social sciences rated the writing they do in their disciplines as being more valuable than that which they did in their freshman writing classes, and students in business, engineering, and technology thought the reverse. (Contains 7 tables of data and a sample 11-page student questionnaire.) (Author/CR)

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And the Survey Says: How Students Assess the Value of Freshman-Writing Programs

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Conference on College Composition and Communication

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to determine whether college juniors and seniors view their freshman-writing instruction as beneficial and to assess its impact on the writing they do within their specific disciplines. Although a great deal of theory surrounds the teaching of freshman writing, very little research has been done to assess its effectiveness from the students' point of view once they start writing within their disciplines. The present research, utilizing a survey which was randomly administered to a sample of juniors and seniors at three colleges/universities in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia, primarily addresses the following questions: 1) How do students assess the value of their freshman-writing instruction? 2) How does a non-discipline-specific freshman-writing curriculum impact discipline-specific writing challenges? 3) Is the writing in a student's chosen discipline more valuable to her than the instruction and practice she found in her freshman-writing program?

And the Survey Says: How Students Assess the Value of Freshman-Writing Programs

Judith D. Mercier and Peter J. Mercier

This research originated in conversations with fellow teachers of composition. Debating whether or not we could ever evaluate what a student had *really* learned about writing, we wondered how we could measure if what we taught in non-discipline specific writing courses benefited students once they began writing in their chosen majors. For many of us, the hardest part of teaching freshman composition is grading. For me, it's never difficult writing comments and questions and suggesting ideas for revision--my creative-writing workshop classes make that sort of critical response second nature to me. It's the decision on a letter or number grade which always gives me pause. Every semester, I try new grading rubrics and go about tabulating, adding, dividing, averaging, eventually giving students some quantitative measure of what *I think* they have learned about writing.

This study attempts to reverse the teacher-student position on assessment by asking college juniors and seniors to evaluate what *they think* they learned about writing in their freshman composition classes. It also seeks to measure students' perceptions concerning what learning takes place about writing in the classes directly related to their major disciplines of study. In other words, where do students believe they best acquire the

writing skills they need for academic success? Do the skills they acquire through non-discipline specific composition classes satisfy the writing demands they face once they begin to write in their majors? What majors are best and least served by non-discipline specific composition courses?

METHODS

In an effort to answer these questions, we surveyed 297 college juniors and seniors in a cross-sectional study, sampling students from three universities in the Tidewater, VA, area--Old Dominion University, Christopher Newport University, and Norfolk State University. Our instrument is a Likert-type questionnaire, measuring responses based on a continuum of agreement. The questionnaire consists of three sections. One section measures demographics only. In another section, we ask students to assess 52 items related to skills they believe they acquired during freshman-writing classes. Finally, we ask them to assess the same 52 items, this time having to do with the skills they believe they have developed while writing in their major fields of study. For the purposes of reporting, the 52 items have been divided into four categories, a taxonomy based on four of the five classical rhetorical canons--25 items measure skills of invention, 9 items skills of arrangement, 9 items skills of style, and 9 items skills of delivery or presentation. For example, items categorized under invention include pre-writing strategies for discovering ideas; finding credible source

material; reading critically; summarizing, paraphrasing, and synthesizing source material; understanding when and how to use definition, narration, classification, comparison-contrast, cause and effect; and establishing a thesis or claim. Arrangement items include developing paragraphs with proofs, writing controlling sentences, ordering supporting material, ordering sentences within paragraphs, using transitional devices, and organizing paragraphs. Style items concern sentence clarity, word choice, conciseness, coordination and subordination, and grammatical conventions. Delivery items focus on formatting, citing sources, mechanics, and punctuation.

Using a numerical score from one to four, students could choose a response of "strongly disagree," "disagree," "agree" or "strongly agree" for each item. After scaling this questionnaire for internal consistency, it was found to be highly reliable at 98%. The methodology for this study is detailed in Table 1.

Table 2 describes the sample's characteristics. Among those surveyed, 56% are white, 33% African-American, with the remaining 11% Hispanic, Asian-American, and other racial categories. The sample is almost equally divided between males and females and college juniors and seniors. Majors were divided into six discipline areas, our sample consisting of 1% business students; 15% humanities students; 10% education students; 15% natural science students; 43% social science students; and 17% engineering and technology students. The mean age in our sample is 25.

RESULTS

Table 3 illustrates the differences between the mean averages students gave their freshman-writing classes and the writing they do in their majors for the classical canon of invention. Scores for this canon are based on a 100-point scale. From these results, it appears that students in business and in engineering and technology scored their freshman-writing classes higher than the writing they do in their discipline when considering where they acquired skills related to invention. However, students in the discipline areas of the humanities, education, natural sciences, and social sciences place greater value on the writing they do in their discipline for acquiring skills in invention. In the humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences, these differences are statistically significant, indicating a 95% certainty that these results are not due to chance. In other words, similar results are likely to occur in repeat studies with different samples of the same population.

Table 4 shows the differences between the mean averages students gave their freshman-writing classes and the writing they do in their majors for the classical canon of arrangement. Scores for this canon are based on a 36-point scale. Like table 3, students in humanities, education, natural sciences, and social sciences placed more value on the writing they do in their majors when considering skills of arrangement. However, none of the results here are statistically significant.

Business and engineering and technology students continued to assess their freshman-writing classes as more valuable.

Table 5 depicts the differences between the mean averages students gave their freshman-writing classes and the writing they do in their majors for the classical canon of style. Scores for this canon are based on a 36-point scale. For this canon, students in the humanities, education, and social sciences rated the writing they do in their discipline as more valuable. However, students in business, natural sciences, and engineering and technology determined their freshman writing classes as more valuable. There are no statistically significant differences in this table.

Table 6 reflects the differences between the mean averages students gave their freshman-writing classes and the writing they do in their majors for the classical canon of delivery or presentation. Scores for this canon are based on a 36-point scale. When considering the canon delivery, students in business, education, natural sciences, and engineering and technology assessed their freshman writing classes as being more valuable. Only students in humanities and social sciences gave a higher rating to the writing they do in their majors for this canon. There are several sadistically significant differences found in this table. The first concerns students in the business and engineering and technology disciplines who rate freshman writing classes as more valuable for skills acquired in presentation or delivery. The second statistically significant

difference involves only those students in the humanities. Here we see that they rate the writing they do in their discipline as more valuable when considering this canon.

Our last table reveals how students responded to the question "Did your freshman-writing class prepare you for the writing you do in your major?" The majority of students in education and engineering and technology did believe that their freshman-writing classes had prepared them for the writing they do in their majors. Students in business, humanities, and social sciences seem almost evenly divided in their responses. Students in the natural sciences, however, felt, by majority, that their freshman-writing classes did not prepare them for the writing they do in their major.

Conclusion

We would be remiss if we failed to mention that this study does have several limitations. First, our study used what is known as a "convenience" sample--classes with professors who readily agreed to having their students surveyed were chosen for sampling. Therefore, because we employed no random sampling methodology, the results of this study can not be generalized. We would like to see this study replicated using randomization or convenience sampling in other geographic locations. Second, students' assessments of freshman-writing classes were based on their recollections, and a small percentage of students in this sample revealed that it had been more than 4 years since they

completed their course work in freshman writing. Finally, there is no way to guarantee that students responded to survey items honestly.

The results of this study suggest that students' perceptions about the value of freshman writing vary according to their majors. Consistently, sample students in the humanities and social sciences rated the writing they do in their discipline as being more valuable than that which they did in freshman writing classes. On the other hand, students in business and engineering and technology consistently assessed their freshman writing classes as more beneficial than the writing they do in their disciplines. This study also reveals that students, regardless of major, more often viewed their freshman writing classes as helping them acquire skills related to style and delivery--those canons which focus on items concerning sentence structure, grammatical conventions, mechanics, and punctuation. However, in relationship to developing skills in invention and arrangement, students from four discipline areas rated the writing they do in their disciplines as more valuable. This, as we have seen, is particularly true with invention, an indication, perhaps, that discipline-specific writing may, in fact, stimulate students to think more critically, to seek out information, to feel more confident about having something to say.

As writing teachers, this study may encourage us to redesign our courses to more satisfactorily meet the needs of students from a variety of discipline areas. This, of course, means

tailoring assignments to each student according to his or her chosen major. It also involves exposing students to examples of quality writing in subjects outside our own areas of expertise and helping them analyze how they work and why they are effective. It means forging stronger links between our freshman-writing programs and other departments. For some of us, it may mean changing the ways we typically evaluate writing and developing a greater appreciation for the written discourse of social scientists, historians, mathematicians, and botanists. Though many of us feel we already have plenty on our "teaching plates," this study motivates us to believe that these extra efforts may increase the odds of what we all already desire and ofttimes accomplish--teaching students to write well in every discipline.

Table 1. Methods

N = 297

Instrument: Likert-type questionnaire (3 sections)

Response categories:
1 = Strongly Disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Agree
4 = Strongly Agree

Section 1 - Demographics

Section 2 - What students learned in their freshman-writing class

Rhetorical Canons

Invention:	25 items	(Scale = 25 to 100)
Arrangement:	9 items	(Scale = 9 to 36)
Style:	9 items	(Scale = 9 to 36)
Delivery:	9 items	(Scale = 9 to 36)

Section 3 - What students learn in the writing they do for their majors/disciplines

Rhetorical Canons

Invention:	25 items	(Scale = 25 to 100)
Arrangement:	9 items	(Scale = 9 to 36)
Style:	9 items	(Scale = 9 to 36)
Delivery:	9 items	(Scale = 9 to 36)

Table 2. Sample Characteristics

Variable	N	Percentage
Race/Ethnicity:		
Caucasion	166	56.1
African-American	98	33.1
Hispanic	5	1.7
Asian/Pacific Islander	8	2.7
Other[1]	19	6.4
Sex:		
Male	132	44.8
Female	163	55.2
Class Standing:		
Junior	150	50.7
Senior	146	49.3
College:		
Christopher Newport	106	35.7
Old Dominion	97	32.7
Norfolk State	94	31.6
Discipline:		
Business	3	1.0
Humanities	42	14.5
Education	28	9.7
Natural Sciences	43	14.8
Social Sciences	124	42.8
Engineering/Technology	50	17.2
Age:		
Mean = 25.12		
Range = 19 - 49		
GPA:		
Mean = 3.01		
Range = 1.96 - 4.00		

[1]Includes Native American, alien, and other categories.

Table 3. Mean Difference on a 100-Point Scale Where Students Believe Their Learning Takes Place: Rhetorical Canon Invention, by Discipline

	Freshman Writing		Discipline Writing	
Discipline	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Business	68.00*	4.4	63.33*	11.6
Humanities	69.47*	8.5	75.18*	11.5
Education	71.00	7.0	72.44	7.1
Natural Sciences	67.13*	8.3	70.00*	9.3
Social Sciences	71.42*	11.0	75.30*	12.2
Engineering/ Technology	72.33*	13.4	68.54*	17.5

*$p < .05$

Table 4. Mean Difference on a 36-Point Scale Where Students Believe Their Learning Takes Place: Rhetorical Canon Arrangement, by Discipline

	Freshman Writing		Discipline Writing	
Discipline	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Business	26.00	1.0	23.33	4.7
Humanities	25.46	4.1	26.95	4.5
Education	25.89	3.3	26.51	3.7
Natural Sciences	25.12	3.0	26.48	4.2
Social Sciences	25.05	4.1	27.40	4.8
Engineering/ Technology	26.34	5.0	24.10	7.4

Table 5. Mean Difference on a 36-Point Scale Where Students Believe Their Learning Takes Place: Rhetorical Canon Style, by Discipline

	Freshman Writing		Discipline Writing	
Discipline	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Business	27.67	6.1	23.67	4.9
Humanities	**25.20**	**4.0**	**26.49**	**5.6**
Education	**25.48**	**3.9**	**26.19**	**3.4**
Natural Sciences	26.12	3.6	24.92	4.1
Social Sciences	**25.69**	**5.2**	**26.53**	**5.2**
Engineering/ Technology	26.52	5.5	23.98	7.2

Table 6. Mean Difference on a 36-Point Scale Where Students Believe Their Learning Takes Place: Rhetorical Canon Delivery, by Discipline

	Freshman Writing		Discipline Writing	
Discipline	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Business	26.00*	4.6	24.33*	5.5
Humanities	**25.74***	**4.6**	**27.80***	**4.8**
Education	26.71	3.9	26.36	4.0
Natural Sciences	25.98	4.1	24.79	4.5
Social Sciences	**26.19**	**5.4**	**27.46**	**5.2**
Engineering/ Technology	26.94*	5.4	23.38*	7.7

$p < .05$

Table 7. Percentage of Students Who Believe That Their Freshman-Writing Curriculum Prepared Them for the Writing They Do in Their Majors

Discipline	Yes	No
Business	0.7	1.7
Humanities	14.5	15.0
Education	10.1	9.2
Natural Sciences	12.5	17.5
Social Sciences	44.0	44.1
Engineering/ Technology	18.2	12.5
Total	100.0	100.0

Part 1. For each statement below, please check the response THAT BEST DESCRIBES your point of view or experience concerning WHAT YOU REMEMBER LEARNING in FRESHMAN-WRITING (composition) CLASS.

IN MY FRESHMAN-WRITING (composition) CLASS, I learned:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
how to develop ideas for writing	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to brainstorm	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to freewrite	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to cluster	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to conduct research	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to read more carefully	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to paraphrase others' written ideas	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to summarize main points	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to critique others' written ideas	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to synthesize multiple sources	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to focus a topic	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to write a thesis sentence	_____	_____	_____	_____
how and when to define terms	_____	_____	_____	_____
how and when to describe people, places, and things	_____	_____	_____	_____

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
how and when to narrate events	_____	_____	_____	_____
how and when to compare or contrast	_____	_____	_____	_____
how and when to classify people, places, and things	_____	_____	_____	_____
how and when to show cause or effect	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to consider my audience (readers)	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to write persuasively	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to explain concepts	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to evaluate others' arguments	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to identify faulty logic (fallacies)	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to write introductory paragraphs	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to write conclusions	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to develop paragraphs	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to write controlling (topic) sentences	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to use supporting material (i.e. proof, evidence)	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to organize supporting material within a paragraph	_____	_____	_____	_____
how and when to use examples	_____	_____	_____	_____

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
how and when to use statistics	_____	_____	_____	_____
how and when to use authoritative opinions	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to organize multiple paragraphs	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to transition from one paragraph to the next	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to write clear sentences	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to show connections between ideas	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to combine sentences (coordination)	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to show emphasis (subordination)	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to improve my word choice (vocabulary)	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to be more concise	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to identify grammatical errors	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to correct grammatical errors	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to use metaphors	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to format a formal research paper	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to format an essay (i.e. paragraph structure, indent new paragraph)	_____	_____	_____	_____

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
how to cite sources within my own text	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to document sources in a bibliography	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to spot punctuation errors	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to correct punctuation errors	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to spot spelling errors	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to correct spelling errors	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to spot mechanical errors (i.e. capitalization, abbreviations, italics)	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to critique others' writing	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to revise my own writing	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to edit my own writing	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to work effectively in groups (collaborate)	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to write exam essays	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to use word-processing	_____	_____	_____	_____

Part 2 is continued on the next page.

Part 2. For each statement below, please check the response THAT BEST DESCRIBES your point of view or experience concerning WHAT YOU LEARNED ABOUT WRITING IN YOUR MAJOR/ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE.

In the WRITING I do FOR MY MAJOR, I learned:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
how to develop ideas for writing	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to brainstorm	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to freewrite	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to cluster	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to conduct research	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to read more carefully	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to paraphrase others' written ideas	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to summarize main points	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to critique others' written ideas	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to synthesize multiple sources	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to focus a topic	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to write a thesis sentence	_____	_____	_____	_____
how and when to define terms	_____	_____	_____	_____
how and when to describe people, places, and things	_____	_____	_____	_____
how and when to narrate events	_____	_____	_____	_____

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
how and when to compare or contrast	_____	_____	_____	_____
how and when to classify people, places, and things	_____	_____	_____	_____
how and when to show cause or effect	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to consider my audience (readers)	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to write persuasively	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to explain concepts	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to evaluate others' arguments	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to identify faulty logic (fallacies)	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to write introductory paragraphs	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to write conclusions	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to develop paragraphs	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to write controlling (topic) sentences	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to use supporting material (i.e. proof, evidence)	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to organize supporting material within a paragraph	_____	_____	_____	_____
how and when to use examples	_____	_____	_____	_____
how and when to use statistics	_____	_____	_____	_____
how and when to use authoritative opinions	_____	_____	_____	_____

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
how to organize multiple paragraphs	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to transition from one paragraph to the next	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to write clear sentences	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to show connections between ideas	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to combine sentences (coordination)	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to show emphasis (subordination)	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to improve my word choice (vocabulary)	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to be more concise	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to identify grammatical errors	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to correct grammatical errors	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to use metaphors	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to format a formal research paper	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to format an essay (i.e. paragraph structure, indent new paragraph)	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to cite sources within my own text	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to document sources in a bibliography	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to spot punctuation errors	_____	_____	_____	_____

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
how to correct punctuation errors	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to spot spelling errors	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to correct spelling errors	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to spot mechanical errors (i.e. capitalization, abbreviations, italics)	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to critique others' writing	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to revise my own writing	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to edit my own writing	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to work effectively in groups (collaborate)	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to write exam essays	_____	_____	_____	_____
how to use word processing	_____	_____	_____	_____

Part 3. ABOUT YOU: Check the appropriate response that best describes your answer to each item or fill in the blanks where appropriate.

What is your age? _____

What is your sex? _____

What is your class standing?

_____Junior _____Senior

What is your race?

_____Asian/Pacific Islander _____Native American

_____Hispanic _____African-American _____White

_____Other

What is your marital status?

_____Single, never married _____Living with partner

_____Married _____Separated _____Divorced

_____Widowed

Which best describes the place where you live?

_____A house _____An apartment _____Dormitory

_____Other (please specify)

What salary range best describes your personal income?

_____Less than $10,000 _____$10,001 to $20,000

_____$20,001 to $30,000 _____$30,001 to $40,000

_____$40,001 to $50,000 _____More than $50,000

In what college or university are you currently enrolled?

_____Old Dominion University

_____Norfolk State University

_____Christopher Newport University

From which college or university do you intend to graduate?

_____

Do you use word processors/computers to draft essays and research papers?

_____Yes _____No

If no, what method do you use to draft essays and research papers? _____

Do you use word processors/computers for your final revisions of essays and research papers?

_____Yes _____No

If no, what method do you use to finalize your essays and research papers? _____

To the best of your recollection, what were the most valuable things you learned in your freshman-writing (composition) class.

_____

In your opinion, did your freshman-writing (composition) class prepare you for the writing you do in your major?

_____Yes _____No

In other college level classes? _____Yes _____No

If so, which classes? _____

In what college or university did you take your freshman writing (composition) class?

_____Old Dominion University

_____Norfolk State University

_____Christopher Newport University

_____Thomas Nelson Community College

_____Tidewater Community College

_____Other (please specify_____)

What is your current GPA?_____

What is your major?

_____Accounting

_____Art

_____Business Administration

_____Communications

_____Computer Engineering

_____Counseling

_____Aerospace Engineering

_____Biological Sciences

_____Chemistry

_____Civil Engineering

_____Computer Science

_____Criminal Justice

_____Dance

_____Dental Hygiene

_____Economics

_____Education

_____Electrical Engineering

_____English

_____Finance

_____Foreign Language

_____Geography

_____Geology

_____Health Professions

_____History

_____Information Systems

_____International Studies

_____Management

_____Marketing

_____Mathematical Sciences

_____Mechanical Engineering

_____Music

_____Nursing

_____Oceanography

_____Philosophy

_____Physical Therapy

_____Political Science

_____Psychology

_____Public Administration

_____Sociology

_____Statistics

_____Theater

_____Urban Studies

_____Women's Studies

_____Other (please specify_____)